

## **What Time Was It?**

by Sydney Lea

That long-legged woman was not you, though she was almost as striking, almost as tall. We stood together for mere moments on the sidewalk, having come out of a Rothko exhibit. The paintings were hung on one floor only. How had I missed her indoors?

She seemed rushed. I saw her hail a taxi and flee, as I inately put it to myself. In that mere instant, I noticed her beauty, but although they never met mine, it was more specifically her eyes that intrigued me. Unlike yours, they seemed full of sadness.

She shook out her hair just before getting into the cab. The gesture was brisk, but it made me sigh, because it too revealed certain fascinating, if indefinable traits, ones I now know were of my own invention.

Tell me my sorrow at her disappearance was plain silly, and I can't argue, yet to a desperately romantic and lonesome young man it felt profound.

Music, cuisine, dance styles, fashions and a million further things have changed since she escaped, as I absurdly put it that May afternoon. But just after she rode off, I turned—and there you were. Of course, you weren't, not for years, but my interior time is forevermore elastic.

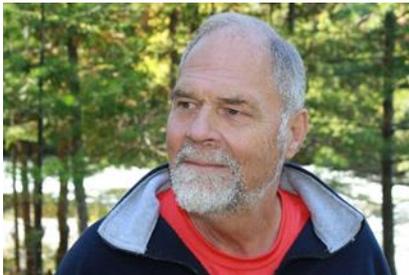
You were there, and, incredibly, still are. Thank God the other woman got free so quickly, I say to myself, no matter nothing indicated she gave me a passing thought as someone to be dodged—or even noticed.

If there's a god, then he or she or it uses coincidence to get things accomplished while remaining incognito. That deity forced my fancied paragon's rapid retreat, and prompted a number of other things. Otherwise, you and I would never have met.

I'd been offered that job in the northwest, had even been sent the airplane ticket to come look around the college campus. A day before going, though, I got an offer in upper New England and accepted it. What might life down in New York be like for you? Or Charleston? Or San Francisco? That's the sort of thought you may have been entertaining in those days. You had so many capacities, as you'd go on to prove, and I'm sure the opportunities would have been legion.

We two are together, four decades later. How right in hindsight, that taxi cab's speeding away.

At one point, I saw the young woman examine her wrist, which was naked. How right in hindsight, her not asking me, say, what time it was.



A former Pulitzer finalist and winner of the Poets' Prize, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. He is the author of twenty-three books, the latest "*Seen from All Sides: Lyric and Everyday Life*," essays; fourteen of these volumes are poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Here* (Four Way Books, NYC,

2019). In 2021, he was presented with his home state of Vermont's most prestigious artist's distinction: the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts.